MEETING OF THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

Friday 1996 May 10th at 1600m
in the Scientific Societies’ Lecture Theatre, Savile Row

M. S. LONGAIR, President
in the Chair

Secretaries: A. M. CRUISE
K. A. WHALER

The President. Good afternoon. I’m pleased to welcome you to the last ordinary meeting of this session. First of all I must apologise for my terrible voice this afternoon; you’re lucky that you’re hearing anything at all, as I’m suffering from a very bad sore throat. In future meetings normal service will be resumed! [Laughter.]

There is one change to the published programme, and it now runs as follows: we begin with Dr. Fitzsimmons, who will talk to us about Comet Hyakutake, and the second talk will be by Dr. Mike Warner, from Imperial College, on ‘Extraterrestrial Impacts and Mass Extinctions: Geophysical Investigations at the Chixulub site’. Then there will be Professor Kivelson, on ‘The Internal Magnetic Field of Io’, and finally Dr. Murdin, on ‘The Next Medium-Sized ESA Mission’. So first of all I’d like to invite Dr. Fitzsimmons, from the Queens University of Belfast, to come up and talk about ‘Comet Hyakutake’.

Dr. A. Fitzsimmons. In late March people were treated to the rare sight of a ‘Great Comet’, as Comet C/1996 B2 Hyakutake became circumpolar from mid-northern latitudes. Comet Hyakutake was discovered at 10th magnitude by a Japanese amateur astronomer, Yuji Hyakutake, on 1996 January 30. Subsequent astrometry allowed Dr. Brian Marsden to calculate an orbital period of 14000 years, implying that it has been around the Sun several times since being perturbed inwards from the Oort cloud an unknown time ago. It would reach perihelion on May 1 at a heliocentric distance of 0.23 AU. Most importantly, on its inbound passage it would pass the Earth at a distance of only 0.1 AU on March 25th, the closest approach of any comet to the Earth since IRAS-Araki-Alcock in 1983.

Comet Hyakutake certainly lived up to expectations. By perigee in late March, the comet was a spectacular sight — for North Americans! The weather over Northern Europe was generally atrocious during this period. However, it cleared enough by March 27 to allow the comet to be seen from most of the UK. All told, Hyakutake was one of the most spectacular comets of recent times, with